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ABSTRACT

Contract learning is an alternative way of structuring a learning experience. Instead of specifying how a body of content will be transmitted (content plan), it specifies how a body of content will be acquired by the learner (process plan). Students identify problems or issues that are real for them and relevant to the course at hand, state learning objectives that address attainment of knowledge and/or development of a skill, and name learning resources. Results of the learning contract demonstrate evidence of the achievement of learning objectives. This guide provides information on: (1) the theoretical foundations of contract learning; (2) developing effective learning contract assignments; (3) the instructor's role; (4) learning contracts to improve students' understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal communication; (5) an interpersonal communication evaluation form; (6) student feedback regarding the learning contract assignment; and (7) advantages of using learning contracts. A bibliography and an example of a completed learning contract written by a student including summaries of information sources, personal insights, and a follow-up action plan are appended. (LL)

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SP

ED 372 038

I WANT TO LEARN WHAT I WANT TO LEARN IN THE WAY I CHOOSE TO LEARN IT:

USING LEARNING CONTRACTS

PRESENTATION

WESTERN STATES COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

GREAT IDEAS FOR TEACHING SPEECH (G.I.F.T.S.)

COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTEREST GROUP

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LEARNING CONTRACTS DEFINED

> Contract learning is, in essence, an alternative way of structuring a learning experience: It replaces a content plan with a process plan. Instead of specifying how a body of content will be transmitted (content plan), it specifies how a body of content will be acquired by the learner (process plan) (Knowles 39-40).

Students identify problems or issues that are real for them and also relevant to the course at hand. They then identify the learning objective and learning resources. Objectives may address attaining knowledge and/or developing a skill. The result of the learning contract is some kind of evidence of the achievement of the learning objective.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CONTRACT LEARNING

> We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world (Rogers 120).

1. Many writers and researchers suggest that for students to survive in a changing world, the goal of educators should be not only to impart state of the art knowledge of their fields of study to their students but also to teach their students how to learn and to solve problems relevant to their subject areas.

> Knowing how to learn is the most basic of all skills because it is the key that unlocks future success. Individuals who know how to learn can more easily acquire other skills. Without this essential skill, however, one's learning is not as rapid or as comprehensive and long lasting. (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer 37)

2. The traditional instructor takes responsibility for what and how students learn. For educators to achieve the goal of teaching students how to learn, instructors should become facilitators of learning.

> The traditional teacher--the good traditional teacher--asks her or himself questions of this sort: "What do I think would be good for a student to learn at this particular age and level of competence? How can I plan a proper curriculum for this student? How can I inculcate motivation to learn this curriculum? How can I instruct in such a way that he or she will gain the knowledge that should be gained? How can I best set an examination to see whether this knowledge has actually been taken in?" (Rogers 136)

3. Carl Rogers wrote about the approach that a facilitator of learning (Malcolm Knowles' andragogical model) takes to his or her teaching and learning role. He notes that the facilitator of learning asks the following questions of the students: "'What do you want to learn? What things puzzle you? What are you curious about? What issues concern you? What problems do you wish you could solve?'" (136). When the instructor has the answers to these questions, Rogers suggests that the instructor should ask the following questions:

> "Now how can I help him or her find the resources--the people, the experiences, the learning facilities, the books, the knowledge in myself--which will help them learn in ways that will provide answers to the things that concern them, the things they are eager to learn?" And, then later, "How can I help them evaluate their own progress and set future learning goals based on this self-evaluation?" (136)

4. Educators make a distinction between conventional teaching and teaching that develops students' learning skills. The main difference between the two approaches is that, in the conventional approach, skills of learning are covert, the learner passively receives information, and the focus is on the product of learning. In the developing learning skills approach, skills of learning are made overt and discussed, the learner actively seeks information, and teachers and students focus on the process of learning and the product of learning. Both approaches may be used at the same time to teach a course.

5. Instructors' rewards change from feeling a sense of accomplishment by helping students achieve course competencies by providing them with information to feeling a sense of accomplishment by helping students achieve course competencies by serving as motivator, coach, and resource person. Students achieve course competencies by developing, implementing, and evaluating their own learning plans.

> Faculty members must change their psychic reward system from valuing the extent to which the learners conform to their direction to valuing the extent to which the learners take the initiative in directing their own learning. Traditional teachers tend to get satisfaction from controlling the energy of learners; facilitators get their satisfaction from releasing the energy of learners. (Knowles 246)

6. The learning contract assignment is one way that instructors can help students to identify their own learning objectives within the parameters of their course objectives and can be a means for students to learn how to learn in their subject areas.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE LEARNING CONTRACT ASSIGNMENTS

1. Decide on a starting and ending date for the contract.

2. Decide on types of problems or issues to be addressed by the students.

3. Develop means for helping students to identify their personal learning objectives.

4. Identify and make available to students learning resources.

5. Develop a general format for the learning contract assignment. State the specific criteria for accomplishing each section of the learning contract assignment.

Example One--the result is evidence of the achievement of the learning objective such as a paper, presentation, videotape, transcripts from interviews (Knowles 27-37):

a. State learning objectives.

b. State resources and learning strategies.

c. State target date for completion.

d. State how the evidence of completion of the learning objective will be presented.

e. State how the evidence of completion will be judged or validated by experts other than the instructor.

f. State how the results (products) of the learning contract will be evaluated by the instructor.

Example Two--the result is a report of the completion of each section of the learning contract assignment (Rogers 135-161):

a. Specify the learning objective.

b. Specify the need to achieve the objective (statement of the problem or issue).

c. Specify the learning resources.

d. Summarize content of learning resources relevant to the learning objective.

e. Summarize personal insights gleaned as a result of interacting with the learning resources.

f. Specify the action plan for achieving the learning objective.

g. Evaluate the results of the each step in the action plan.

h. Specify the follow-up action plan.

6. Develop evaluation criteria.

7. Provide suggestions for learning objectives.

8. Provide suggestions for learning resources.

9. Provide examples of effective completed learning contracts.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

1. Explains the theoretical assumptions of the use of learning contracts and the advantages to the students of their use of learning contracts.

2. Explains clearly the learning contract assignment and relieves students fears regarding the learning contract process.

3. Provides students with examples of successful student learning contracts.

4. Helps students to identify problems or issues relevant to their lives or relevant to their futures and also relevant to the course objectives.

5. Helps students to identify learning resources relevant to the problems or issues that they are addressing. The learning resources may include classroom experiences, print materials, audio and video materials, experts, and seminars.

6. Recommends the purchase of relevant learning resources to become part of the library collection.

7. Helps students to develop action plans relevant to their learning objectives.

8. Monitors students progress as they work through the learning contract.

(Instructors may ask students to announce their objectives and learning resources in class. This provides instructors and students with the opportunity to give feedback to the students regarding the

relevancy of objectives and resources. Some students may choose not to disclose their objectives to the class due to the personal nature of their objectives. Also, instructors may periodically ask the students if they are experiencing any problems in completing their learning contracts.)

9. Provides students with the opportunity to learn from each other's experiences in working through their learning contracts.

(Instructors may ask students to report on their learning contracts in small groups and to select one learning contract to be presented to the whole class. Some students may choose not to disclose their contracts due to the personal nature of their objectives. These students could present an objective report on resources consulted for the contract and avoid any personal self-disclosure. Also, instructors may ask students to write a letter to students who will be taking the course in the future. In the letter, students would provide tips on how to complete a learning contract successfully.)

10. Evaluates the evidence of the accomplishment of the learning objectives of the learning contract.

11. Evaluates the use of the learning contract assignment as a means for students to achieve the course objectives. A student questionnaire could be used to gather evaluation data. Possible open ended items are as follows:

a. Please describe the benefits to you of completing the learning contract assignment.

b. Please describe any difficulties you had in completing the learning contract assignment.

c. Please present your opinion regarding the use of the learning contract assignment as a means for students to achieve the course objectives.

COM 110 (INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION)

LEARNING CONTRACT

A. **PURPOSES:**

1. To improve your understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal communication.

2. To improve your analysis of your own and others' interpersonal communication skills.

3. To improve your application of interpersonal communication skills to your life.

4. To improve your critical thinking, listening, and writing skills.

B. **SPECIFIC CRITERIA:**

1. Follow the format explained below:

   a. **GENERAL LEARNING OBJECTIVE:**

      (1) State the general interpersonal communication skill that you will work to improve.

      (2) Begin the statement with: To (use an action verb) . . . (For example: To increase, to raise, to eliminate, etc.)

      (3) The emphasis is on making a specific behavioral change in your interpersonal communication behavior.

      (4) For example: To raise my self-esteem.

   b. **SPECIFIC LEARNING OBJECTIVE:**

      (1) State the specific interpersonal communication behavior that you will work to improve.

(2) Be realistic about your chances for achieving the objective given time deadlines. The more specifically the objective is stated, the more likely you will be able to measure its accomplishment.

(3) Begin the statement with: To (use an action verb) . . . (For example: To increase, to raise, to eliminate, etc.)

(4) For example: To reframe my negative self-talk to positive self-talk.

(5) Your instructor will provide you with a list of general and specific objectives for each learning contract. You may choose a general and specific objective from this list, or you may choose a general and specific objective not included on this list. As you research the general learning objective, the source material will provide numerous suggestions for specific learning objectives.

c. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

(1) Briefly discuss the problem(s) that you wish to solve. Discuss specific instances and consequences of the problem. State your goal for completing the contract.

(2) Brief example: I tend to think negative thoughts about my ability to succeed. Because of this pattern of negative thinking, I have experienced failure in many situations. (Discuss specific instances and consequences of the problem). My goal is to be able to reframe my negative self-talk to positive self-talk with the result of increased self-esteem.

d. SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

(1) You must research a minimum of three sources of information about your specific learning objective.

(2) You may use print and nonprint sources such as books, articles, audiotapes, and videotapes. You may also attend lectures or interview experts.

(3) Your instructor will provide you with a list of print and nonprint sources for each learning contract from which you may choose sources of information. These sources will be available in the PVCC library either on the shelves or on reserve. This will not represent an exhaustive list of sources. Your own research will uncover other sources of information. Review the annotated bibliography at the end of each of the chapters in your textbook (Weaver, 1993) for additional sources.

(4) List your sources using proper bibliographic form.

(5) For example:

Cristiano, Marilyn J. "Reframing." Training Manual for a Course in Public Speaking, 2nd ed. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1992.

Fimbres, Jon Lea. Interview. 10 Jan. 1992.

Helmstetter, Shad. The Self-Talk Solution. New York: Morrow, 1987.

Johnson, Helen M. How Do I Love Me? Salem: Sheffield, 1986.

McGinnis, Alan Loy. "Part Two: Daily Exercises for Building Self-Confidence." Confidence: How to Succeed at Being Yourself. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987.

"Power of Positive Thinking." Videotape. Karl-Lorimar Home Video, 1987.

Stoop, David. Self-Talk: Key to Personal Growth. Old Tappan: Revell, 1982.

Weaver, Richard L. II. "Experiencing Emotion: Sharing Our Feelings." Understanding Interpersonal Communication. 6th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Weaver, Richard L. II. "Getting in Touch: Self-Concept, Self-Awareness, Self-Acceptance, and Self-Actualizing." Understanding Interpersonal Communication. 6th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Weaver, Richard L. II. "Getting in Touch: Self-Talk and Self-Disclosure." Understanding Interpersonal Communication. 6th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

e. **SUMMARY OF SOURCES OF INFORMATION:**

Write a two- to three-page objective summary of information covered by the sources that you reviewed or write a two- to three-page annotated bibliography. Be sure that the information included is relevant to your specific learning objective. Do not simply list topics covered in the sources and do not critique the sources. Present a clear, objective, and organized description of relevant information. If you use direct quotes, identify them by using in-text references.

f. **SUMMARY OF PERSONAL INSIGHTS**

Write a two- to three-page summary of what you learned about your own and others' interpersonal communication behavior based on the sources reviewed.

g. ACTION PLAN:

(1) State specifically how you will accomplish your specific learning objective.

(2) Be realistic about your chances for achieving the action plan given time deadlines. The more specifically the action plan is stated, the more likely you will be able to measure its accomplishment. Be sure to include a time frame for the accomplishment of your action plan. The time frame may exceed the due date of the contract; however, you must begin implementing the action plan during the time given for completing the contract.

(3) For example:

(a) During the next three days, identify three negative self-talk statements that I use most frequently.

(b) On the fourth day, reframe the three negative self-talk statements to positive self-talk statements.

(c) Write the positive self-talk statements on a three by five note card. Review the positive self-talk statements four times a day (in the morning, noontime, dinner time, and bedtime) for the next seven days.

h. RESULTS:

Write a one page summary assessing your success in achieving your specific learning objective. Discuss the results of each step in the action plan. Your action plan may fail; that is, you may not achieve your specific learning objective after implementing your action plan. This is acceptable because sometimes the best "laid plans" are not effective. The only exception to this rule is if you did not attempt to implement the action plan.

i. **FOLLOW-UP ACTION PLAN:**

(1) Based on your assessment of your success in achieving your specific learning objective, write a specific action plan for continuing your work to achieve the specific learning objective.

(2) For example:

Since I found the rehearsal of positive self-talk helpful in raising my self-esteem and building my self-confidence, I plan to continue daily the practice of identifying my negative self-talk statements, reframing them to positive self-talk statements, and rehearsing them. I know from my research that it is important to continue to monitor my self-talk because of its impact on my self-esteem.

2. Word process or type your learning contract (double-spaced). The print should be clear and legible. Staple your contract.

3. Write with clarity and accuracy. Use complete sentences, correct spelling and punctuation, and accurate grammar. Use of the first person ("I") is acceptable.

C. ***CRITERIA FOR ANALYZING EXCELLENCE:**

1. Format and content of each category of the learning contract conforms to the assignment.

2. Evidence of effective research.

3. Evidence of an in depth analysis of interpersonal communication theories and skills.

4. Clarity and accuracy of writing style: Complete sentences, correct spelling and punctuation, and accurate grammar.

***See "Interpersonal Communication: Evaluation Form for Learning Contracts" for specific criteria.**

D. **COPIES OF LEARNING CONTRACTS THAT STUDENTS HAVE COMPLETED IN THE PAST ARE ON RESERVE AT THE CIRCULATION DESK IN THE PVCC LIBRARY.**

E. **NEED ASSISTANCE IN WRITING YOUR LEARNING CONTRACTS?** If so, see your instructor during her office hours or by appointment, or ask for tutorial assistance at the PVCC Learning Assistance Center!

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

EVALUATION FORM FOR LEARNING CONTRACTS

STUDENT'S NAME_____TOTAL POINTS_____

RATING SCALE:

5 = SUPERIOR; 4 = EXCELLENT; 3 = GOOD; 2 = FAIR; 1 = POOR; 0 = UNACCEPTABLE

GENERAL LEARNING OBJECTIVE (5 POINTS)

A change in interpersonal communication behavior is stated, and an action verb is used in the statement of the objective. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

SPECIFIC LEARNING OBJECTIVE (5 POINTS)

A specific change in interpersonal communication behavior is stated, and an action verb is used in the statement of the objective. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM (10 POINTS)

1. Nature of the problem is clearly and concisely stated. 5 4 3 2 1 0

2. The specific goal of the contract is clearly and concisely stated. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

SOURCES OF INFORMATION (10 POINTS)

1. A minimum of three sources are listed in proper bibliographic form. 5 4 3 2 1 0

2. Each source is relevant to the specific learning objective. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

SUMMARY OF SOURCES OF INFORMATION (10 POINTS)

1. A clear, objective, and organized description of the information gleaned from the sources of information consulted is presented. 5 4 3 2 1 0

2. Information reported is relevant to the specific learning objective. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

SUMMARY OF PERSONAL INSIGHTS (10 POINTS)

1. A clear and organized description of personal insights regarding interpersonal communication behavior gleaned from the sources of information consulted is presented. 5 4 3 2 1 0

2. Information reported is relevant to the specific learning objective. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

ACTION PLAN (10 POINTS)

1. Specific and logical steps to accomplish the specific learning objective are presented. 5 4 3 2 1 0

2. A time frame for the accomplishment of the action plan is presented. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

RESULTS (10 POINTS)

1. A clear and organized assessment of the results of each step in the action plan is presented. 5 4 3 2 1 0

2. Results reported are relevant to the specific learning objective. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

FOLLOW-UP ACTION PLAN (10 POINTS)

1. Specific and logical steps to accomplish the specific learning objective are presented. 5 4 3 2 1 0

2. A time frame for the accomplishment of the action plan is presented. 5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

WRITING STYLE (10 POINTS)

1. Sentence structure	5 4 3 2 1 0
2. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation	5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

TECHNICAL ASPECTS (10 POINTS)

1. Format	5 4 3 2 1 0
2. Copy quality	5 4 3 2 1 0

POINTS_____

COMMENTS:

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT FEEDBACK REGARDING THE LEARNING CONTRACT ASSIGNMENT IN COM 110 (INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION) AT PARADISE VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Please describe the benefits to you of completing the three learning contracts.

The learning contract concept is an acceptable method of engaging the student in the purpose of the course, learning communication skills. It forces you to do research on subjects you would otherwise bypass. For myself, I investigated areas that I had some difficulties with, and as a result, I am able to see why and how to deal with it. I have gained greater insights into myself and my behavior in regards to communicating interpersonally.

The benefit of the learning contracts was being able to identify my problems and then researching to find solutions. It made me stick to an action plan and change my behavior.

It made me aware of some aspects of my life that I will continue to work on. Also, I read some great books and will probably read more now that I know what I want to work on.

I have taken the class information more personally than any other class I have ever taken. The largest benefit is the amount of personal expression I have vented as a result of this class . . . it's very therapeutic.

It made me act out and follow through on what I needed to improve. For the most part I know what my problems are and always said that I need to work on that but never really ever followed through with it.

I felt that I accomplished something not only for school but also for my life. It really opens your eyes to things you never would have thought of.

Please describe any difficulties you had in completing the learning contracts.

The only difficulties were in the realizations of my behaviors. Being in ENG 102 and learning about research helped in contract preparation. In reviewing other students' papers, I noticed they had difficulties in organizing and writing their papers. Some received scores not reflective of what they learned. Possibly ENG 102 should be a prerequisite.

Finding effective resources at the PVCC library.

The time limits. I wished that I had more time so that I could deal with the problems in my learning contracts in more depth than I did due to time restrictions.

Trying to get my feelings on paper and expressing them effectively.

The most difficulty I had in completing the learning contracts was actually getting started on the entire process.

It is sometimes difficult to find fault with oneself and then write about it.

My grades on the contracts were lower than I expected them to be.

Please present your opinion regarding the use of the learning contract assignments as a means for students to achieve the course objectives of COM 110 (Interpersonal Communication).

A most excellent tool for teaching and for learning. When I told other teachers about this requirement, they were amazed. I think every course should utilize this technique.

I think that they are a good way to either recognize and change bad habits, learn more about a specific problem, learn to understand

the impact of your behavior on others, and learn to understand the impact of others' behavior on you.

The use of learning contracts takes the educational process one step further (reading, comprehending--and, then, implementing). "I hear, I forget. I see, I remember. I do, I understand."

I feel that this way of teaching (learning contracts) is the best way I have encountered so far as reaching and extending my techniques for personal learning.

I enjoyed doing the learning contracts. It helped to make the course fun and more interesting. It was a pleasant change from taking chapter tests. By using learning contracts instead of tests, people can expand on ideas brought out in class that can help each individual out. There is a more relaxed atmosphere without tests, and I felt I could spend more time learning instead of memorizing.

The contracts are an excellent way to encourage learning and change on a deep, personal level. We all can gather in class and lecture and intellectualize. Yes, we should be good listeners, and we should not be defensive; but, to practice what we preach is difficult. The learning contracts give students the opportunity to practice what they learn. However, if a student does not have the willingness to change and a teachable attitude, the contracts will only be a burden. So really, to me, the contracts are a great learning tool as long as the students want them to be.

I really enjoyed doing the learning contracts. I think I learned more about myself and the people in my life by doing these contracts than I did from all the psychology classes I had to take for nursing.

The learning contracts are helpful because you can find the points in which you are personally weak and work on it. Any other class you have to go along chapter by chapter and work on things with the entire class. Time and energy is not wasted on skills already mastered.

A few students did not implement their action plans, and therefore lied about the results of the action plan.

ADVANTAGES OF USING LEARNING CONTRACTS

> The empowerment of persons, the encouragement of self-direction, and the enhancement of learning by the whole person--with feelings as well as thoughts--constitute a profoundly revolutionary approach to education in this society . . . The individual who sees himself and his situation clearly and who freely takes responsibility for that self and for that situation is a very different person from the one who is simply in the grip of outside circumstances. This difference shows up clearly in important aspects of his behavior. (Rogers 250-278)

1. Students achieve personal learning objectives more effectively than learning objectives that are imposed on them.

2. Students remember the learning experiences that they themselves initiate.

3. Students learn to identify problems and issues relevant to their lives and to identify their strengths and weaknesses relative to course competencies.

4. Students more effectively integrate theory and practice.

5. Students learn to identify and evaluate a variety of learning resources.

6. Students learn to identify their learning strengths and weaknesses.

7. Students learn how to learn. They learn to identify learning objectives and to develop creative and effective action plans for achieving learning objectives.

8. Students learn to evaluate the accomplishment of their own learning objectives.

9. Students are free to use their preferred learning styles.

10. Students are motivated to learn and change behavior because they have identified problems and issues relevant to their lives and have identified their own means for solving relevant problems and for evaluating the results.

11. When students fail, they are motivated to try again.

12. Students accept responsibility for their own learning and gain confidence in their abilities to be self-directed learners.

13. Instructors learn along with their students and as a result of their interactions with their students. A community of scholars is developed. Instructors and the students perceive themselves as lifelong learners humbly and effectively diagnosing individual learning needs and pursuing learning outcomes in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

14. Instructors model for students the advantages of being a lifelong learner.

> We have learned that it is possible . . . for students to become reliably self-directing; to choose, and bear the responsibility of the consequences of their choice; to learn more than in the traditional classroom; and to do so with enthusiasm. (Rogers 303).

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RESERVE

COM 110 (INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION)

LEARNING CONTRACT ONE

GENERAL LEARNING OBJECTIVE:

To improve my interpersonal communication skills.

SPECIFIC LEARNING OBJECTIVE:

To effectively discipline my children without yelling.

THE PROBLEM:

I yell at my children (10 year old daughter, 4 1/2 year old son) entirely too much. I tend to be easily angered by their petty bickering and the anger typically results in my yelling. I also tend to yell when they misbehave. Not only am I unhappy with myself for losing my temper over relatively minor incidents, but I am aware of the negative effect my yelling has on the children, and it's become more and more obvious that my yelling does not produce the desired effect; that is, yelling does not make my children behave.

For example, this morning my son went into my daughter's room uninvited (and unwanted, I might add) and "borrowed" one of her Barbie dolls. (Apparently his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were resting.) My daughter demanded the immediate return of Barbie (#27) and a fight ensued, as my son saw no reason why he

should surrender this one doll when she had thirty others with which to amuse herself. I began yelling that they should quit fighting and get along. They did--for about 12 seconds. Then they began yelling at each other, in much the same way I yelled at them. Nothing was solved, nothing was settled. Perhaps the only thing learned was that if there's a problem, a good way to deal with it is to yell about it. Not exactly what I had in mind.

I was recently reminded of the negative impression I make on my children when I apologized to my son for yelling at him. I explained that I had had a bad day but still shouldn't have yelled at him and was sorry. I asked him if we could still be friends. He just nodded his head, smiled the sweetest smile and said "You always say you shouldn't yell, and then you yell."

My goal, then, is really two-fold: to find a better way of handling my anger (regardless of the source) and to be able to calmly and effectively deal with my children's behaviors.

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SUMMARY OF INFORMATION SOURCES

It seemed to me that, in order to make an effort to curtail my yelling, I would first have to take a look at why I yell; that is, I would need to investigate anger itself--not so much the source of my anger as my expression of it. Weaver agrees when he says, "Feelings and emotions, whether positive or negative, are not good or bad. It is the way they are expressed that can be constuctive or destructive" (290).

Rubin says "We generally get angry at people who have some meaning for us..." and that we are "...more likely to get angry at people with whom we relate..."(168). It's not uncommon for us to be intolerant of others exhibiting traits similar to ones we would rather not admit to possessing ourselves.

"The important thing," says Rubin, "is to know and accept angry feelings--without judgment" because "...acceptance of feelings...gives one the chance to decide whether one wishes or does not wish to express those feelings" (165). (Boldface mine).

Carol Tavris, in her book Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion, agrees that acknowledging feelings of anger is a big first step. She also believes that acknowledgement doesn't necessarily have to lead to expression of the anger. She thinks that venting anger is not necessarily the best approach. She says "It seems to me that the major side effect of the ventilationist approach has been to raise the general noise level of our lives...the

people who are most prone to give vent to their rages get angrier, not less angry" (121). She further states that ventilating anger (verbal aggression) can confuse the issues for both the venter and the ventee: "The decision about whether or not to express anger rests on what you want to communicate and what you hope to accomplish, and these are not necessarily harmonious goals" (123).

Tavris and Rubin are in agreement that verbal aggression is usually not effective because it makes the other person defensive and inclined to strike back. It follows then that people who shout and yell would not get positive results (say, noticeably improved behavior) and "...so the next time they feel angry they yell louder" (Tavris 129), leading to negative reinforcement.

Tavris and Rubin say that everyone gets angry. LeShan goes one step further when she says, "Contrary to what many people think, anger is not something we should try to avoid at all costs. It is an entirely normal part of human experience. Its power to be harmful and destructive is completely dependent on our ability to face angry feelings and learn how to deal with them" (1985, p.254). Each individual's response to anger is learned, an acquired strategy and, therefore, alterable. So, there is nothing inherently wrong with the emotion itself, but we sometimes need to acknowledge anger then perhaps decide what we hope to accomplish before expressing it.

Tavris summed it up when she said "...The moral use of anger...requires an awareness of choice and an embrace of reason.

It is knowing when to become angry...and when to make peace; when to take action, and when to keep silent; knowing the likely cause of one's anger and not berating the blameless" (253).

In order to be an effective interpersonal communicator, one needs a positive nonjudgmental attitude toward others and a willingness to be flexible and open-minded. Kent believes that "Our attitude toward other people is often a reflection of how we feel about ourselves" (32), so if we're fixed and rigid, we leave less room for understanding and nonjudgmental acceptance of others. One way to be less rigid and tense is to practice meditation and/or relaxation techniques as a way of dealing or coping with stress or anger. Girdano discussed the importance of breathing in his section on relaxation and offered many exercises involving controlled breathing techniques geared to enhance one's ability to relax.

Assuming that the above mentioned volumes would help suggest ways for me to both deal with and find more effective ways of expressing anger (instead of yelling), I felt I could also benefit from information on child disciplining techniques. I knew I would have to replace the yelling with something more productive.

There is a wealth of information available concerning child rearing and discipline. I finally had to stop collecting sources and start analyzing the information I had gathered to date.

Balter states, "Although punishment and discipline are related, they are not the same." He goes on to mention that the

root of the word discipline comes from the Latin discipulus, or disciple. "That word best expresses the ideal relationship of child to parent. A parent acts as teacher and model, helping his child to develop self-control, character, orderly conduct, a sense of values, good judgment, empathy for human beings and other creatures and, most important, self-discipline" (15). Discipline, then, isn't about forcing submission; it's not all punishment. That said, it's important to realize what situations do merit attention and/or require punishment.

There seems to be universal agreement that children need the opportunity to experiment, to try out new behaviors and social skills in the place where they feel most safe--that is, the home. Dyer says, "Kids try out their worst behaviors in an environment where they know they won't be rejected." Sibling relationships are all part of the learning experience, too. What better way to practice interpersonal communication skills (conflict resolution, listening, sharing, etc.) than to experiment with a readily available brother/sister? Therefore, the suggested solution is to let siblings work out their own differences and solve their own relationship problems, discovering on their own what the limits are, intervening only "...when truly hurtful exchanges take place. That, too, is part of learning about relationship. It is essential to know that when a person loses control, he or she may need the help of someone in authority" (LeShan, 1992, p.40). If children are to feel free to explore and experiment, we have to allow them the freedom to make minor mistakes--without

major repercussions. Balter suggests that we choose "...the issues that are significant enough to fight over, and ignore or use distraction for those you can let slide..." (31).

But what about those "significant" issues? How does one deal with them?

Everyone seems to agree that yelling as a means of discipline is usually ineffective, and even when it does "work", the effects are short-lived and "people wind up feeling badly" (Patterson 53). Balter states "...a deep firm tone is likely to be more influential. A constant diet of yelling can cause children to become anxious, to disregard verbal commands and to stop listening, and can even provoke some children to proceed further with bad behavior" (22).

There also seems to be agreement that corporal punishment (spanking), as a rule, is a no-no. Overall, the belief is that the message being sent is that might makes right, or that physical confrontation solves problems--neither of which is true or effective. Changing undesirable behavior with positive reinforcement is the recommended way. (This allows the child to maintain his self-esteem and take responsibility for his actions). Another recommended discipline technique is "time out": a misbehaving child is given a predetermined amount of time alone--removed from the scene of the crime, taken away from center stage. This gives both the child and the parent a chance to cool off and reflect.

Key concepts in effective discipline are reinforcement, consistency and sincerity in terms of consequences for undesirable behavior. If you threaten to send Johnny to bed if he continues to beat on the dog, you have to follow through and see that he does, in fact, go to bed if he continues to terrorize Spot. Otherwise, he knows your threats are empty and your attempts at discipline will be ineffectual. Children can sense when you are wavering, and will take advantage of it.

Many of the techniques discussed do not provide quick results, and so those parents who want to see immediate changes of behavior are advised to be patient and realize that negative or undesirable behaviors did not begin overnight, and so they will not end instantly. Long term changes require long term commitment and effort, yet it needn't be looked upon as a chore. If you're going to take the time to do something, why not do it right? If a child is disciplined with love, respect, compassion and honesty, he will learn to love, respect, be honest and compassionate, for children observe and are aware of far more than they are given credit for. Actions do indeed speak louder than words.

Responsibility for the growth, development and instruction of one's offspring is an enormous challenge, it is true, but the rewards and pleasures inherent in such a task are equal in their enormity. If we can rediscover what it's like to be a child, we cannot help but communicate better with our children. If we see ourselves as guides and teachers, rather than taskmasters, the

opportunity exists for us as parents to experience growth and wonderment right along with our children. We need only be open and willing to take the time for a little self-exploration, for a chance to remember and reacquaint ourselves with the child that exists still in all of us.

SUMMARY OF PERSONAL INSIGHTS

One of the best insights I gained from the research for this paper was Weaver's statement that feelings and emotions lack any goodness and/or badness in and of themselves, but rather it's the expression of them that can be either constructive or destructive. I've often felt angry with my children, then felt guilty over the anger, then more angry over the guilt...until things simply escalated way out of control. I realize now that, while not everyone gets upset over the same things I do, everyone does indeed get angry at some time or another.

If individual response to anger is learned, I can not only unlearn my old response (yelling) but I should be able, in the process of learning new responses, to set a positive example for my children. I know that my mother was a yeller, as was her mother. They used to joke (with pride) about how I'd inherited the Polish temper. As a child, I thought it was an accomplishment of which I should be proud; I now believe it's hurtful and not the type of legacy I'd care to pass on to my children.

I've also come to believe that it's possible to become angry and not yell, that one doesn't have to vent anger in a loud fashion. I know, too, that children learn what they observe and, perhaps, if my children see that I can be upset with them without raising my voice they will be able to handle their differences without yelling.

Dyer believes that most of the fighting that goes on at home between siblings is for mom's (or dad's) benefit, that it's a way for the kids to be in control. They can fight and mom will have to come in and referee. I tend to agree. It would seem, then, that if I remove myself from the game there would be no game. Since they really don't fight about anything significant anyway, I'm going to attempt to let them handle their confrontations themselves.

Dyer also believes that most of the problems we have with our children are our problems. I think he's right. We want them to be independent, yet we get upset when they don't do exactly what we ask/tell them to.

I believe, then, that I need to reconsider exactly what I want for my children. If I want them to forever be dependent on me to tell them what to do and how to do it, I can be dictator-like and continue yelling. If I truly want to encourage their creativity and independence, I must be willing to find ways to step back; to offer encouragement and guidance, yes, but to let them have the opportunity to learn many of life's lessons for themselves.

ACTION PLAN

a) Call a "family meeting" to discuss with my children changes I would like to make in my yelling habits (I've already discussed this with my husband).

b) Explain to the kids that I will no longer get involved in their petty arguments, and that they will have to settle things between themselves.

c) Begin meditating, practicing breathing techniques outlined in Controlling Stress and Tension.

d) Identify three positive behaviors each of my children exhibit and write them on note cards. Review the cards before meditating and before bed time. Keep the notecards within reach when I am around the children.

e) Walk out of the room and review the note cards instead of yelling if the children begin bickering.

f) Discuss inappropriate/unacceptable behavior with the children in a calm manner. "Time Out" will be used as means of discipline when appropriate.

g) Find at least three times during each day to praise each child specifically and individually.

h) Encourage my children to help me in my effort to modify my yelling behaviors, letting them see that one is never too old to change negative behaviors, or to ask for help when it's needed.

i) Stop yelling by Christmas.

RESULTS

The children listened, somewhat skeptically, when I told them that I would like to change my yelling habits. Perhaps they didn't think it was possible.

Things got more interesting when I told them I would no longer get involved in petty arguments. My daughter said, "What if he takes my Barbies?" and, before I could answer, my son said, "I do not take your Barbies..." and a typical fight started. My husband and I just got up and walked outside. Within two minutes, the "argument" ended and the kids came out and asked if we were done with the "meeting". We went back in and continued.

I began meditation as a way of dealing with child-rearing stress (and school-attending stress). It may be too early to tell if any major changes have occurred as a result, but I enjoy the quiet time in the morning all alone. I cannot say with certainty whether it's the meditation or my acceptance and awareness of the tension that has lessened the stress level (or at least my perception of it) in my life. Ultimately, I don't suppose it really matters.

I found the writing of my children's positive behaviors on notecards a great help. They serve as a reminder that my children really are great kids and that the "good" things they do are far more significant than the irritating ones. Reviewing the cards before meditation and before bed serves as a way of reinforcing these ideas.

For those times when the kids are arguing, taking the cards and leaving the room is a good idea. In practice, though, it's been difficult for me. I still find myself starting to step into their fights, at least sometimes. I am encouraged, however, by noting that during those times when I have been able to walk away, they were able to settle their differences eventually without me.

By letting minor irritants slide I am able to discipline the children less frequently, which seems to be more effective. It's not as big an impact as I would like, but it is a noticeable improvement. The children aren't crazy about "time out", but I must say, it's far more effective than yelling. When they are separated from each other and me, there's no one to perform for or with; there is no interaction. They are eager to get back with the family.

On a positive note, I have noticed that each child truly enjoys the individual attention he receives when I take the time to praise, even if it's something as simple as "Thank you for helping your brother tie his shoes," or "You really helped by cleaning your room."

Enlisting their assistance in my attempt to curtail yelling is a good idea but, as it stands, needs some refinements. Currently, anytime I raise my voice they jump right in to remind me that I'm not supposed to yell, interjecting while the words are still coming from my mouth. This is irritating at best.

FOLLOW-UP ACTION PLAN

Since the children respond so well to praise and do, indeed, seem less inclined to fight when they think I won't participate, I have to believe that positive reinforcement and refusing to get dragged into their fights is working. My daily review of the children's positive traits serves to remind me that they're great kids and leaves me more inclined to overlook minor "flaws", so I will continue with that aspect of the plan as well. The meditation is something I enjoy so even though I really cannot gauge its effect, if any, as of yet I will continue it also. I need to find other ways of dealing with the quick flashes of anger that still occasionally inspire me to yell. Perhaps something as simple as counting to ten (or a hundred) will help. I have noticed that the anger dissipates quickly so maybe that little counting trick will give me the time I need to gain control.

The kids love the idea of helping me out. I just need to explain to them the fine art of timing and perhaps redirect their enthusiasm a bit. Still, if I invite criticism, I must be willing to accept it.

While the overall change has not been as dramatic as I would perhaps like, I know from my research that I didn't acquire the behavior overnight and therefore won't be able to dispense with it quickly; I also know that slow, steady change is the most apt to be permanent. Therefore, though I may not totally achieve my goal by Christmas, I know I'll be well on my way.